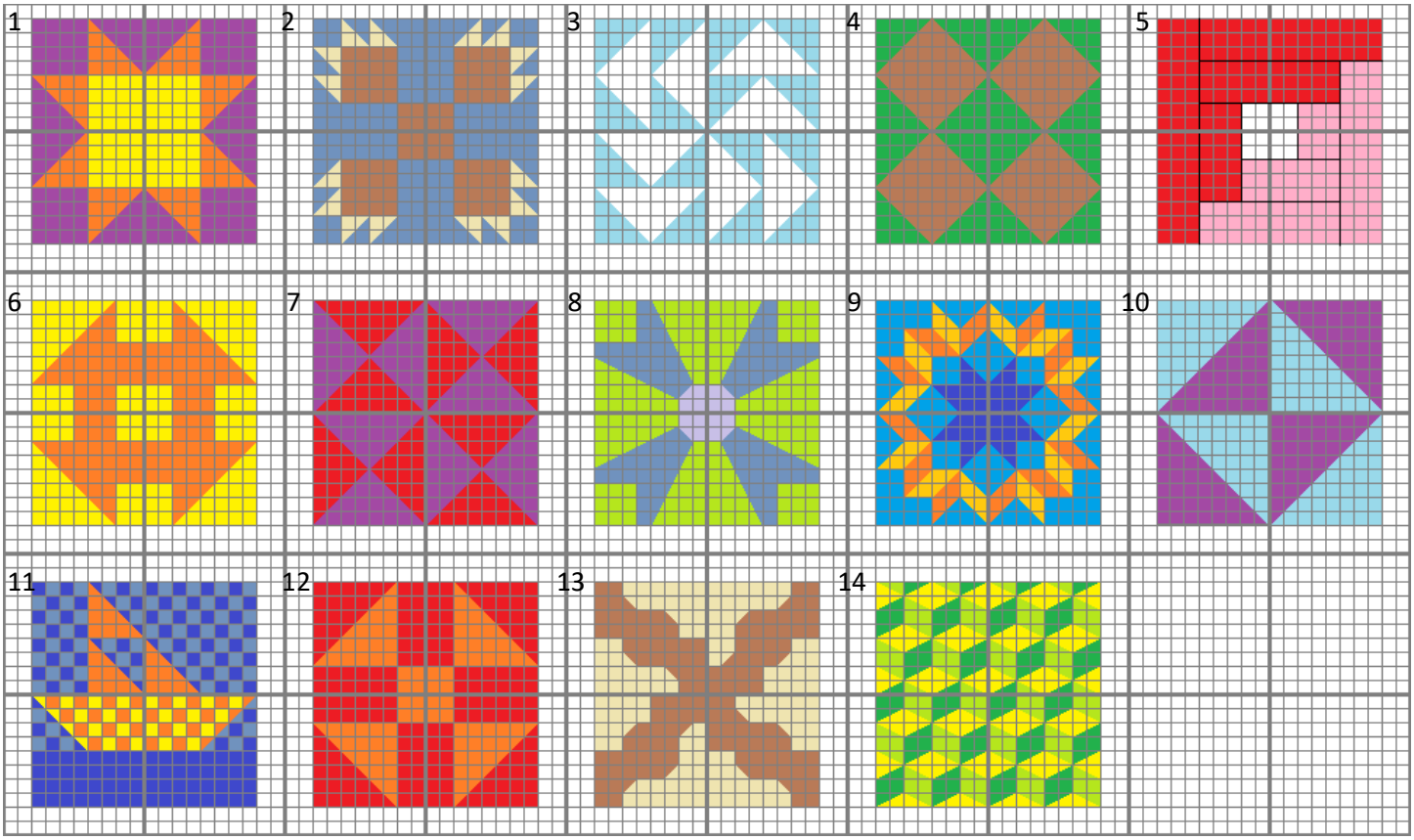
Quilt Code Blocks in Cross Stitch

Prior to the American Civil War (1861-1865) many enslaved people in the U.S. tried to escape to areas where they could freely live. The travel was dangerous because if caught, they could be sent back and suffer grave consequences. Many of them had to cover could be hundreds of miles but sometimes they had help. There were some safe places where they could rest and perhaps be given a meal. This network of safety and aid was called the Underground Railroad. Some travelers were fortunate when they met with one of the few individuals, called conductors, who would lead them to the next place. Some relied on generous strangers who remained anonymous but provided coded messages about local risks and ways to get to the next place of temporary safety. It may be that quilts airing in the sun held these messages. By hanging them so certain blocks were particularly obvious may have provided guidance. Helen Hough, April 2022.



1. North Star: Two possible meanings – prepare for escape or follow the North Star to Canada
2. Bear Claw: Follow an animal trail through the mountain to food and water.
3. Flying Geese: Go in the direction of the spring migrating geese flying north.
4. Cross Roads: Refers to either Cleveland, Ohio, located near Canada, or a decision point.
5. Log Cabin: A place of safety.
6. Monkey Wrench: Gather physical and mental tools for travel.
7. Bow Tie: Change clothes or travel in disguise.
8. Britches: Dress like a free person.
9. Wagon Wheel: Pack for journey by wagon
10. Broken Dishes: There are pieces of broken crockery showing next landmark.
11. Sailboat: Water nearby or boats available.
12. Shoofly: Helper/Guide
13. Drunkard's Path: Take a zig-zag path – pursuers in the area.
14. Tumbling Blocks: Pack up; conductor in the area.

Bryant, Marie Claire. (2019, May 3). Underground Railroad Quilt Codes: What We Know, What We Believe, and What Inspires Us. *Smithsonian Magazine*. https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/underground-railroad-quilt-codes
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